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SILICON VALLEY COMPUTER GENEALOGY GROUP

# PastFinder

1812: How I found it

## Finding a star-spangled ancestor

By Janet Brigham

My second-great-grandfather Curtis Brigham Sr. and his offspring were the stuff of legends. As a youngster I heard that Curtis had been captured by the British — those tyrants of the oceans — in the War of 1812.

The tales were vague enough that my imagination concocted wild scenarios, but none as wild as what actually may have occurred.

As usually happens, all I heard were family stories, without documentation and substantiation. When genealogy became my avocation more than a decade ago, one focus was to explore the legends I had heard about Curtis in the war.

I started as we usually should, with a framework of census, land, and family records. I worked back from my Brigham-surname father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, who were listed in censuses and in various family pedigrees and charts. I also consulted several books about the Brigham family but realized that some information about the more recent Brighams appeared to have inconsistent accuracy. Not surprisingly, the accuracy depended on the source of the information.

First, the framework: Census records for 1850, 1860, and 1870 were informative about Curtis's life from his 50s until two years before his death in 1872. In 1850 he, his family remaining at home, and a farm laborer were living next door to one of Curtis's sons. Curtis's real estate was valued at \$4,000; his son's, \$1,000. By 1860, Curtis's real estate was worth somewhat less, but his neighboring son's was worth more, and another son had married and acquired property nearby. By 1870, Curtis was listed in the census as a "retired farmer."

The family story was that he'd



Michigan Daughters of the War of 1812 celebrated the author's second-great-grandfather's military service with a new memorial headstone in 2009. (Used by permission, Michigan Daughters of the War of 1812.)

fought in the War of 1812 as a young man in Massachusetts, worked as a shoemaker, then moved his wife Lydia Woodbury and their children to Michigan because he'd had enough of war.

He settled in Allegan County, Michigan, as a farmer and a lay minister, hence his designation in old family group sheets as "Dea. Curtis Brigham," sometimes with *Dea.* spelled out as *Deacon*. I learned from accounts online that Curtis had written a brief biography, but no one mentioned where it was. I searched for it online and used the tools of the estimable Library of Michigan but drew a blank.

In the catalog at FamilySearch.org, I found a diary of a neighboring farmer who mentioned Farmer Brigham, noting times he'd stopped by the diarist's farm

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### Outside and Inside

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# Star-spangled ancestor (continued)

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to offer help with farm tasks. On eBay, I found a brief bound history of the Allegan County town where Curtis preached; online, I'd learned that he founded a Baptist church there. From the book, I learned that funerals were his specialty.

Curtis Sr. was beginning to come to life. Little did I know that so many accounts of his War of 1812 experience would surface, none of them reporting the same incidents.

## Newspaper accounts

Years ago I signed up for several Rootsweb lists and engaged in brief exchanges with authors of several Brigham-related websites. Several years after those early posts, a gentleman wrote to ask me if I'd be interested in some family documents he'd collected for his wife. He had learned she wasn't related to the particular lineage strains whose documents he had collected. I assured him I was interested, and he mailed me a manila envelope. He wouldn't let me reimburse him for postage.

Included in the packet was an article evidently from an old Michigan newspaper, detailing some facts from Curtis Sr.'s early life. It appeared to be part of a series. I couldn't readily identify the newspaper, so I contacted the Library of Michigan via their Ask a Librarian feature (you can call or email) and described the article. A librarian wrote me back and asked me to fax what I had. The next step was that a volunteer tracked down and copied not only that newspaper clipping but also all the other articles in the series and mailed them to me.

One of Curtis's descendants had heard her grandfather's stories when she was young, so as an adult she recounted those stories, and a local newspaper published them as part of a local history series. Among the accounts of farming and community life was a description of Curtis's time in the War of 1812.

The article recounted that Curtis, a privateer, had been assigned to guard British prisoners at night. It described him as a somewhat frail young fellow with a gold earring (for his health) and glasses. After the prisoners were released, Curtis encountered them on land, and one of them told him this chilling account: The British prisoners had plotted during the night to

kill their young guard and escape, but Curtis reminded one of the prisoners of his own child, and so Curtis's life was spared.

American Merchant Marine at War (usmm.org) indicates that only 4% of ships involved in the War of 1812 were Navy; the rest were privateers. Only 19% of total U.S. guns were on Navy vessels, and only 19% of enemy ships captured were attributable to actions by the Navy. The rest were captured by American privateers.

Histories of the War of 1812 do indicate that when

American ships took British prisoners, they sometimes did not hold them for long, instead turning them in at port, where they could swear not to raise arms against America again and walk away from captivity. In that regard, the newspaper account is consistent with historical

accounts of how prisoners of war were handled.

## Honored by the Sons and Daughters

At 3 P.M. on 13 June 2009, two groups honored Curtis by erecting a new memorial headstone at his gravesite in Plainwell, Allegan County, Michigan. The invitation to the event indicated that Curtis had "served our United States as a private in the Massachusetts Regiment of Minute Men, in Captain Tisdall's Company." This ceremony was performed by The Stephen Preston Chapter of the National Society United States Daughters of 1812 and The General Benjamin Pritchard Camp 20, Department of Michigan, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War.

The memorial is lovely. The information is ... new. I can find neither Curtis nor Captain Tisdall in Massachusetts Militia records (available for PDF download at archive.org). The only record I have found linking a Tisdall to the War of 1812 is a "Thos. Tisdall" signature on a letter about militia inactivity in Hartford, Connecticut (see illustration, next page). Neither Tisdall nor Curtis is mentioned in Connecticut military rolls covering the War of 1812.

Of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Tisdall could have been an officer in Massachusetts at some point; Curtis could have been a private in the militia. If documentation beyond family or community lore exists, it could take some searching.

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## Honored by a son

It used to be common for publishers to compile volumes of local biographies. Curtis's son John Woodbury Brigham was in such a book (take a deep breath): *Portraits and Biographical Record of Kalamazoo, Allegan & Van Buren Counties, Michigan, containing Biographical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens, Together with Biographies of all the Governors of the State, and of the Presidents of the United States* (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1892). (A web search on the first words of the title brings up access from the University of Michigan or the Internet Archive of the Library of Congress.)

Curiously, John W.'s biosketch tells more about his father than about himself — apparently a tribute from a son to his memorable father. It indicates that because Curtis had “meager” education, he left his parents' Massachusetts home in 1812 at age 19 and walked 90 miles to Boston to seek employment.

Curtis soon secured a position on a ship that traveled between Boston and the Maine coast. On the third voyage, a British gunboat fired on the ship, captured it, and set all but one crew member adrift in a leaky boat. For 24 hours they drifted on the ocean, kept afloat only by nonstop pumping. When the “exhausted castaways” reached Bath, Maine, they were rescued.

Curtis then returned to Boston and opened a shoe shop. On dry land.

The story is in character with what we know of British-American interactions in the war. The Americans had only a few Navy ships when they declared war, and relied heavily on privateers. Both sides captured each other's ships and, when possible, turned them into their own fighting vessels. The British practice of impressing American sailors into the British navy and merchant marines was a major reason that the United States declared war. In this case, rather than impressing the American sailors, the British set them adrift to an uncertain future.


Some details about Curtis in the biography ring true; federal land records verify the biography's account of Curtis settling in Michigan. Other details raise questions: A published history of Gun Plains, Michigan, indicates that Curtis was a lay minister, whereas the John W. Brigham biographical sketch

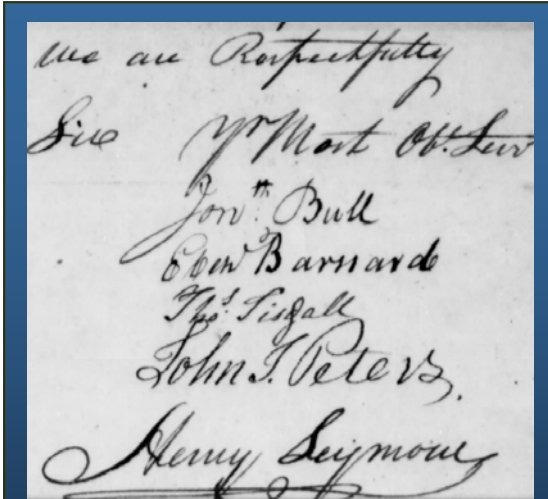
indicates that Curtis had been licensed to preach “before leaving the East.”

## Limitations of family lore

Without family lore and family stories passing from generation to generation, we would know little about Curtis beyond his good will as a neighbor and farmer and his expertise at funeral sermons. If his autobiography survives, I certainly would be interested in seeing it. I always prefer original source material.

What we do know is that one document says that Curtis was a prisoner, another document indicates that he guarded British prisoners, and a third source states that he was in the Massachusetts Militia. These events are not mutually exclusive. The curious point is that the three accounts do not overlap. Did John W. Brigham not know about his father's service with the Massachusetts Militia? Or about the night he could have been overtaken by his prisoners?

The initial questions seemed simple: Was Curtis involved in the War of 1812? If so, what did he do? The complications come from the current answers to those two questions. To address the next layer of questions may require building more frameworks, filling in more details, and uncovering sources beneath sources. 



Signatures on a letter regarding the militia at Hartford, Connecticut, signed by “Yr Most Ob, Serv” (your most obedient servants), community leaders in Hartford, including a Thomas Tisdall, who was married to the daughter of the first signer. Was this Tisdall the leader of a militia unit in which Curtis served?

# Digital captures analog

## Comparing digital microfilm imaging techniques

By Richard Rands

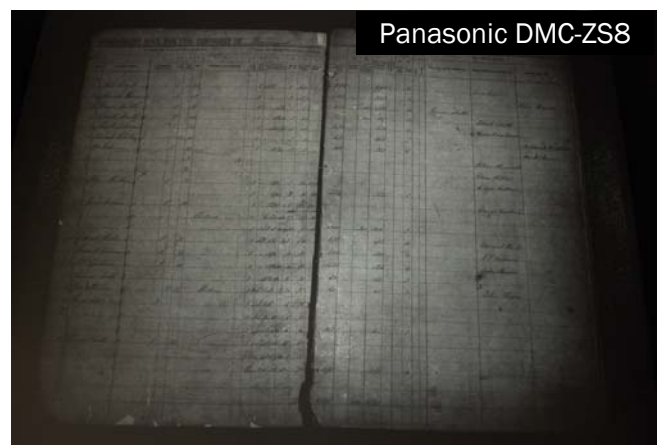
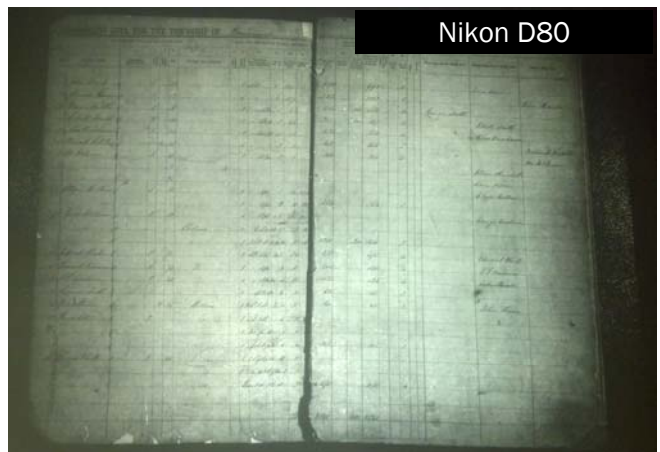
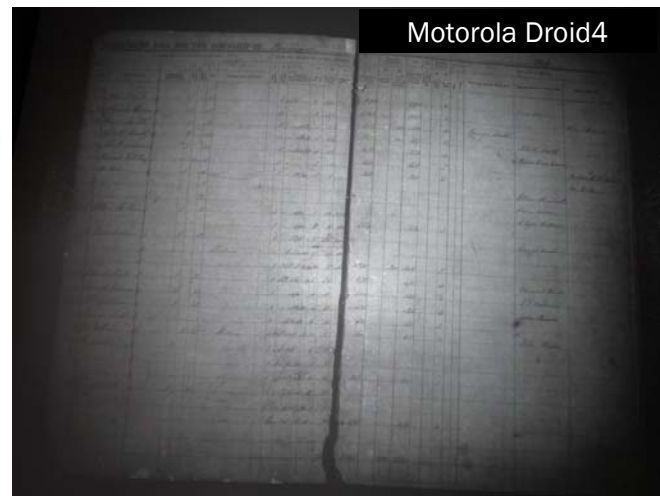
At our local Family History Center (FHC) the subject of differences in results when digital cameras or cell phone cameras capture images projected on typical microfilm readers arises occasionally.

Knowing that digital cameras and the cameras in cell phones have improved significantly over the years, I decided to run an experiment to see if there would be any obvious differences. Typically, a researcher finds documents on a roll of microfilm and wants to capture the images to take home for closer examination, to use for source documentation, or to use when publishing a book. Often the digital image needs to be enhanced with computer software, which necessitates that the original digital image contain sufficient resolution to allow improving its readability.

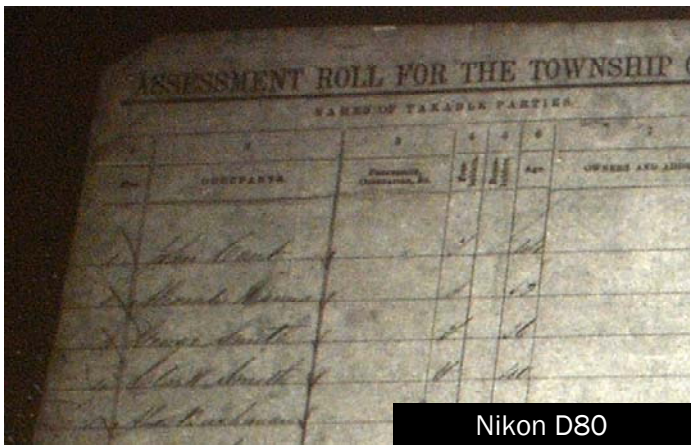
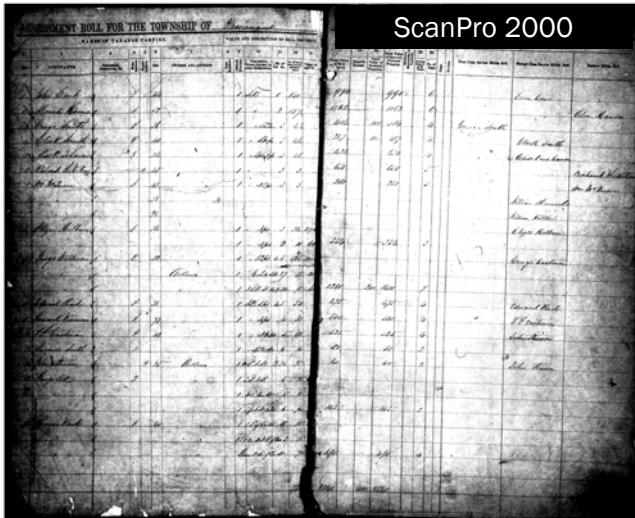
For the scope of this article, I decided to select a single test image on a random roll of microfilm from our collection of films on loan from the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. I picked an image that had less than ideal focus, brightness, and contrast, so that the captured test images would necessarily have to provide the potential for acceptable reading when enlarged on a computer screen and would have the resolution for computer enhancement. I wanted an image that contains both preprinted text and handwritten text so that the extremes of image quality would be readily apparent. I also chose an image that had a fairly wide range of contrast and brightness from edge to edge, to determine whether a single photograph would allow reading the entire image.

Next, I chose a variety of digitizing devices to compare: a Motorola Droid4 smartphone (8 megapixels, 72 dots per inch [dpi]), a digital SLR Nikon D80 set to a high resolution (10.2 megapixels, 300 dpi), a pocket-size Panasonic DMC-ZS8 (14.1 megapixels, 180dpi), and a state-of-the-art digital microfilm scanner identical to the scanners used in the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, the ScanPro-2000, set to the maximum resolution of 600dpi. All images were taken under the same lighting conditions, with the flash turned off. I suspect that some of the cameras might have special settings that could be used to optimize shooting under these conditions, but I used the settings I am familiar with for indoor, low-light, nonflash images.

The un-retouched photos are shown below, followed by the ScanPro image on the next page.



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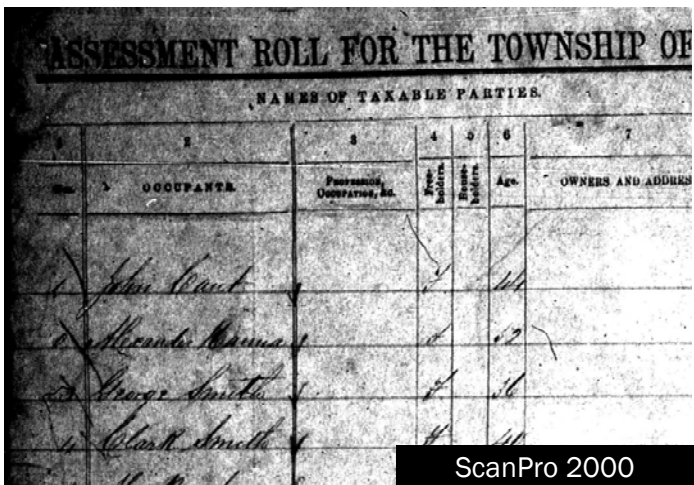
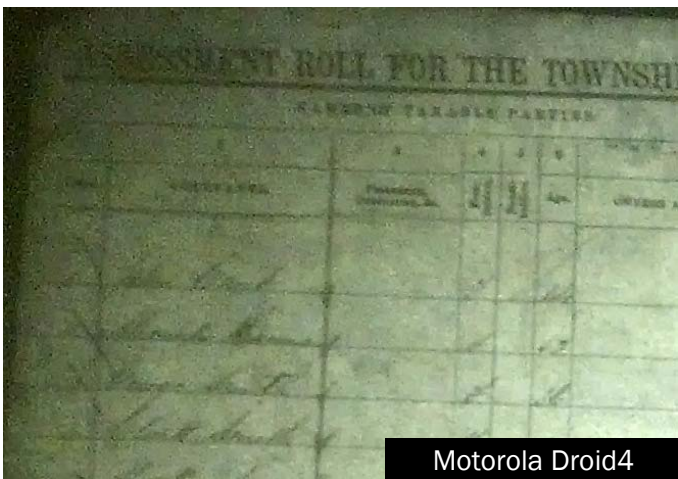
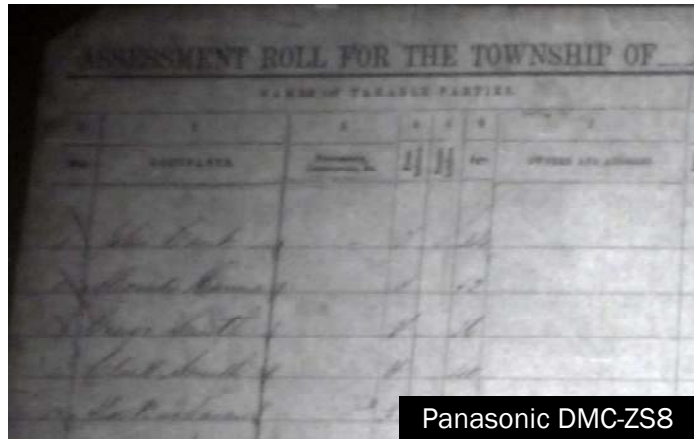
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It is difficult to detect differences among the devices until a small section of the photos is significantly enlarged. The choice of photo enhancement software used is not crucial, because the quality of the image you see depends on a variety of conditions your system can reproduce, including the resolution of your computer's monitor, how much you enlarge the photos, and what dpi you intend to use for printing.

The primary concern is whether or not you can enhance the image so it can be read. I used Adobe's Photoshop Elements version 9 to select the upper left corner of the images for comparison.

Next, using Photoshop Elements, I enlarged each enhanced image to 300% and used a screen capture

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# Ask the doctor Too many papers, too many boxes

**Q** I've been researching my ancestors for a few years now, and I'm accumulating boxes of papers and numerous computer files. I have photos, letters, copies of documents, and histories and pedigrees I've printed off the Web. But I don't know how to make sense of it all. For me, it's more fun to collect information than to organize it and do something with it.

**I need to "grow up" and do it right. What should I do? Where should I start? How can I make sure that I'm not overlooking important facts?**

Most of us who have been at this for any length of time have the exact same problem. You hit the nail on the head when you said it is more fun to collect than to organize. So here are some ideas.

**1. Don't expect to organize it all in one session.** Set aside an hour or half hour every day so you don't burn out and give up.

**2. Use a "triage" process.** Get a bunch of boxes, one for each line in your genealogy as follows: Start with four boxes, one for each of your grandparents' lines. Put a manila folder in each box. If you have a huge collection of stuff, get eight boxes, one for each great grandparent's lines.

**3. Start sorting through all your boxes of papers, photos, letters, documents, etc., and put each item in the appropriate box.** If the item is something that is very important for documenting a genealogical event in your database, such as a birth, marriage, death or a family relationship, put it in the folder that is in the corresponding box. That will separate urgent material from the rest.


Try to avoid getting sidetracked. Sort all of your accumulated boxes of material before you go on to the next step.

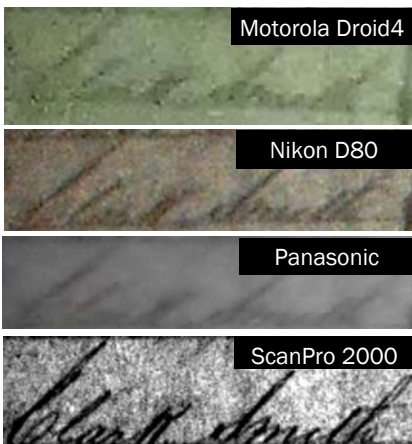
**4. Next, go through each manila folder and handle each item required.** Scan (digitize) every item, back up the files, and enter them into your genealogy database as a source/citation for the relevant person. Work on the contents of each folder until it is all organized.

**5. READ THE WHOLE DOCUMENT!** Identify photos, transcribe handwritten documents, translate documents in foreign languages, and *make absolutely certain you have read all of the relevant details in each document.* So many times I encounter people who have only picked up one or two details from a document, and overlooked crucial details further down.

**6. Finally, go to work on the remaining material in each box.** If the box is relatively full, you may want to repeat the triage process for that box. If it contains only a few items, organize it into binders, small archival boxes, or a file cabinet, or use some other method you feel comfortable using.

**7. Follow these same steps with your computer files.** Create a folder on your computer that corresponds to the boxes and create a sub-folder in each folder the corresponds to the manila folder in the boxes. Move each item in your collection to the appropriate folder or sub-folder and then follow steps 4 through 6 with your computer files.


This system can become an ongoing methodology as you continue to collect items. Just remember to stop collecting every once in awhile and deal with the folders and the boxes. 



## Comparing digital microfilm imaging (continued)

(Continued from page 5)

program (Snagit) to demonstrate the quality of the images on my computer monitor. At left are the screen-captured images of the fourth name from the top, *Clark Smith*.

The result of this comparison seems fairly clear: the dpi of the captured image is the critical factor. When the original image is focused clearly, with ideal contrast and brightness, any of these imaging devices will be satisfactory. But when the original image is less than ideal, you will be better off using a device with a high dpi setting of 180 or higher. 

# Family Tree: Dig a deep hole and plant your tree with lots of fertilizer

By Richard Rands

By now you may have heard that several years ago the FamilySearch department of the LDS Church released for beta testing an online system accessible on the Internet as [new.familysearch.org](http://new.familysearch.org).

At the outset, the site was touted as a method for building "the family tree of all mankind," and was scheduled to be released to the whole world at a future date. Until recently, only LDS members were allowed to perform the testing, primarily because many of the features were aimed at solving problems with outdated programs used by members.

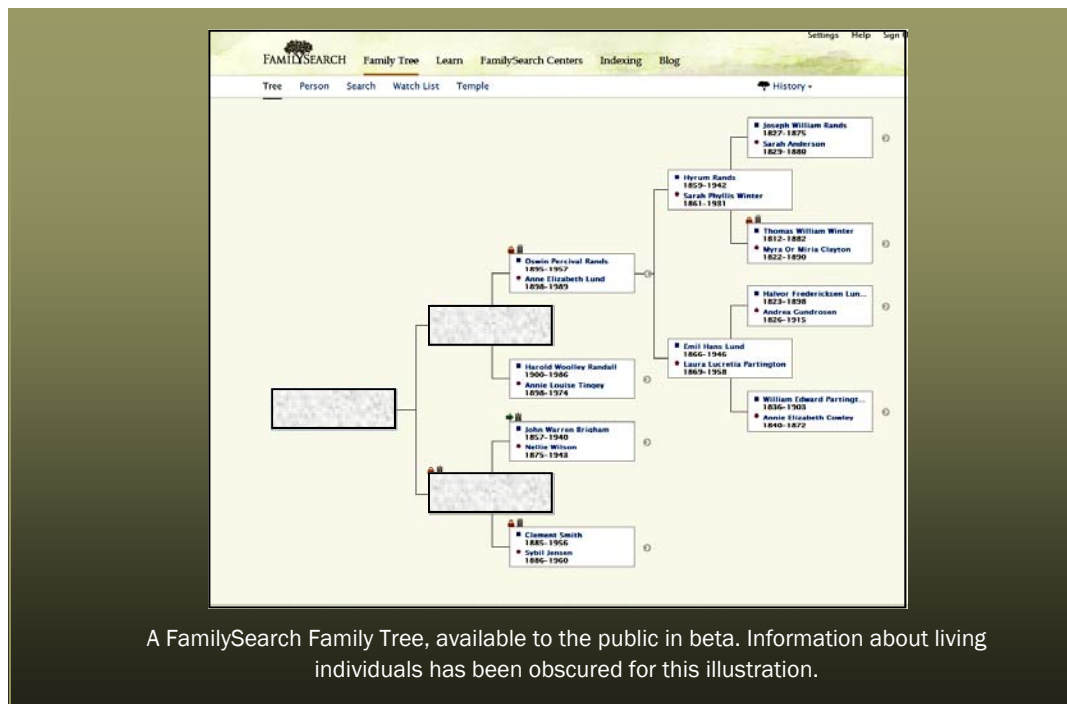
The new system became widely used by LDS members as a way for them to process ancestors' names for LDS temple vicarious ordinance work (for an explanation, see *PastFinder*, April 2012, p. 7).

However, frustrations mounted as users filled in their own ancestry on the system. Over the course of the testing period, users responded with post after post expressing frustration to the point of being infuriated with many of the concepts introduced and the complexity involved in using the system.

## Two objectives

Two of the primary objectives of the system were to combine duplicate entries in the vast collection of records in the FamilySearch databases and to enlist users to help clean up inaccurate data. The process involved combining multiple records into one record, on the presumption that users would distinguish carefully among potential duplicates.

Essentially, these two objectives failed, because many records were combined that were not duplicates, rendering junk genealogy into even junkier genealogy. Evidently, too many casual users did not care about having accurate details with validating sources.



A FamilySearch Family Tree, available to the public in beta. Information about living individuals has been obscured for this illustration.

Above all the commotion was the new practice of allowing anyone to change a user's family tree without any explanation or approval. And if the originator of the original data entry corrected what someone else had done, the second party could come back and make it wrong again. Insiders called this exasperating process "regression wars." One FamilySearch developer referred to the offenders as "body snatchers."

So FamilySearch went back to the drawing board.

Fresh off the drawing board and available for beta testing by everyone (not just LDS members) is the replacement system, called FamilySearch Family Tree, which some have dubbed "FS Tree." Far from a new system, FS Tree simplifies the user interface by dropping the split-screen format and introducing a dynamic pedigree screen with a set of separate individual detail screens.

## New features

The pedigree screen features the ability to zoom in and out and drag the chart around the screen and contains all of the navigation tools to switch among family members, multiple spouses, and different generations. The individual detail screens have been significantly expanded to allow maintaining many new details about each individual.

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## Dig a hole and plant a tree (Continued)

(Continued from page 7)

Another dramatic change that will take users a fair amount of getting used to is the separation of parent-child relationships from couple-relationships. FS Tree appears to use the same central database as new.familysearch because changes in the latter can be seen instantaneously in FS Tree.

The major complaint about the new.familysearch feature allowing any user to modify anyone else's information is still central to FS Tree. When asked about this concern, spokespeople for FamilySearch scoffed at the notion that a family tree belongs to someone, insisting that we all suffer from "tree-itis."

When pressed to explain why the large number of users who have abandoned new.familysearch over

### Upcoming meetings

The group meets monthly except December, on the second Saturday of the month from 9 to 11 A.M. at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 875 Quince Ave., Santa Clara, California (see map at right). The group is not affiliated with any church.

#### 11 August 2012, 9–11 A.M.

- Putting flesh on the bones (Pamela Erickson)
- GenSmarts (Richard Rands)
- Reunion 10 for Mac (Pat Burrow)
- Mac Reunion basics (Pat Solomon)
- Getting started in genealogy

#### 8 September 2012, 9–11 A.M.

- Finding your star-spangled War of 1812 ancestors (Janet Brigham)
- Customizing your database (Richard Rands)
- Reunion 10 for Mac
- Mac Reunion basics
- Getting started in genealogy

this issue have been ignored, the spokespeople used the FamilySearch wiki as an example of a stable, web-based, free-content, openly editable system that demonstrates that FS Tree should be workable.

They further explained that in FS Tree it will be easier to revert your entries back to your preferred state by just a few clicks, and that if "reversion wars" do break out, the system will freeze the tree. Time will tell if conscientious genealogists will be willing to spend precious research time convincing others of the need for validated information and reverting their information back after others change it inexplicably.

In an effort to support better source documentation, a Source Box feature has been included in the system. When I mentioned to the support team that it was backward from the currently popular source/citation systems in virtually every genealogical software package, I was told that the new approach was simplified, to make it easier for inexperienced users, and that hundreds of experienced genealogists had been consulted and agreed to the change. So the new method caters to users who are starting at the beginning in learning to enter source information.

### About the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group

SVCGG is the former Silicon Valley PAF Users Group, a nonprofit group of some 600 genealogy enthusiasts. The group is based in Silicon Valley in the Bay Area of northern California, but members live all over the world.

SVCGG offers classes, seminars, and publications to help family historians improve their skills in using

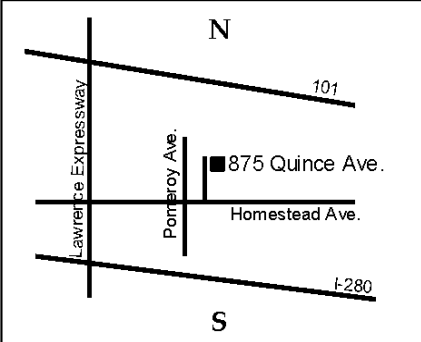
## PastFinder

First place winner  
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Meeting site has ample free off-street parking, with a wheelchair-accessible entrance near the front of the building.

technology for genealogy research.

*PastFinder*, the official publication of the Silicon Valley Computer Genealogy Group, is published monthly except December. *PastFinder* is distributed at meetings to members and mailed to others after the meetings. Members can receive the newsletter electronically by emailed download link.